

CRITICAL DIGEST

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The Weekly Newsletter Digest of the Current New York Theatre

New York Theatre Diary

Highlights of the Empire-Empire 5/24/53. ANTA sponsored all star tribute to famed theatre which will be torn down this summer...Me and Juliet-Majestic 5/28/53 Rodgers & Hammerstein new musical with show business theme featuring Isabel Bigley and Bill Hayes...A Night in Venice-Jones Beach Theatre 6/25/53. Second season of Mike Todd's super outdoor production.

Current Theatre Reviews

Can-Can-Shubert 5/5/53. Weekly drama reviewers joined in a set of mild pro votes for the new Cole Porter musical presented by Ernest Martin and Cy Feuer. They agreed with their daily colleagues that neither Porter score or Abe Burrows lyrics and book was up to their usual high standards. Again duplicating their newspaper friends, the weekly reviewers gave top critical honors to Jo Mielziner's Paris sets and the dancing staged by Michael Kidd. Gwen Verdon, as dancer and actress, was applauded by all. Trade paper reporters predict show, which took in \$750,000 in advance sales, will be a long run hit. Hobe, Variety, did note that French newcomer Lilo became a trifle wearing as the evening goes on. Time man okayed proceedings in spite of drawbacks in music, lyrics and book, crediting the girls and the can-can spirit with providing evening with genuine sex. Kidd's choreography, praised Gibbs, New Yorker, is as funny and charming as anything the playgoer will see in a long while. Though critic is still pondering what Porter and Burrows were trying to say, at least they have made it unlikely, Gibbs, notes, for anyone to base a musical on apache dancers for the next 20 years. WEVD Shipley was kinder than most, he okayed the catchy songs, lively dancers and the amusing burlesque on modern art. WCBS Bill Leonard, is convinced that Porter is in debt to the producers for a slick production, Kidd's dance direction, Mielziner's sets and Lilo, Gwen Verdon and Peter Cookson. Though combination resulted in pleasant evening, broadcaster marked it as a disappointment because he has come to expect something special from a Cole Porter musical.

Charles Laughton at Town Hall

Quartet of NYC daily critics were enchanted all over again by dramatic readings presented by Charles Laughton, who they covered during his 2 day stand at NYC's Town Hall. News, Mirror, Post and Eagle reviewers agreed that the proceedings were dramatic, and not just readings. Instead of reading from the books on the onstage table, they all noted that he acted and lived each sentence and story.

Rosalind Russell at Drama Desk

Wonderful Town star Rosalind Russell enchanted "Drama Desk", NY theatre reporters and editors organization, with her delightful sense of humor. Hollywood actress turned Broadway singer and dancer who has won all the awards this season that haven't been given to Shirley Booth, joked that she would like to send the latter star on a long cruise. As to her own future plays she denied any and all rumors that she would leave musical this summer. But she may make a movie next January. Her present contract with the musical's producers runs to June 1, 1954. NY Post drama editor Vernon Rice retired as president of "Drama Desk" at the group's final meeting of the season. Robert Sylvester, NY News, was elected president, with Rowland Field, Newark News, Vice President. Louis Calta, NY Times, and T.M. Kraus were re-elected treasurer and secretary.

' Off Broadway '

4 plays will be produced by Terese Hayden at Theatre de Lys, starting Jun 9 and running 1 week each. 1st is Simon Cantlon's Maya, which will be followed by Percy Mackaye's The Scarecrow, Sheridan's School for Scandle, and a Hindu play staged by Edward Greer entitled The Little Clay Cart.

Dramatic Workshop has formed an Experimental Theatre Department which will launch a series of studio productions June 24. Living Theatre producers Judith Malina and Julian Beck are the directors. A series of 4 programs will be presented. Production Evening of Short Plays from the Modern Repertory will be presented at Dramatic Workshop May 21-23.

3 poetic dramas presented by Artists Theatre at Comedy Club, 150 E 38, May 18-23 include The Heroes by John Ashberry, The Lady's Choice by Barbara Guest and The Bait by James Merrill.

3 short plays by Tennessee Williams, Lord Dunsany and Bernard Shaw presented at National Arts Club, 15 Grammercy Park May 22-24...Whitefriars Players Guild presenting Ben Jonson's The Alchemist at Sutton Hotel through May 30...US premiere of J B Priestley's The Linden Tree at Finch College Theatre, 52 E 78 May 18-22...Originals Only has returned to its voluntary contribution plan of admission...World of Sholem Aleichem continues at Barbizon Plaza Theatre through May 23.

The Year Round okayed by Jess, Variety, as a better than average Off Broadway musical which would even be better in a more comfortable off Broadway house. But producers were warned not to try to bring their show to Broadway. Pacing of large cast on small stage is excellent, tradepaper mugg noted. He also reported an abundance of good song and dance material for discriminating audiences...Final Equity Library production of season Hobson's Choice, written by Harold Brighouse in 1916, impressed Vene, Variety, as a fairly diverting script which received a competent production. Willard Sage portrayal was marked a stand-out talent find by the Variety mugg.

' Theatre Film Notes '

British made film "Tonight at 8 30", based on Noel Coward's play, will be released in US soon. Film stars Valarm Hobson, Nigel Patrick, Martita Hunt... Moss Hart is writing the screen play of Edwin Booth biography "Prince of Players" to be produced by 20th Century Fox... Warners' has listed a 3 D version of Mister Roberts for production within the next 18 months, but Joshua Logan and Leland Hayward are silent on possible production...Sean O'Casey's Purple Dust may be subject of Charles Chaplin's next film...Final scenes of "Main Street to Broadway" film being shot in lounge and lobby of Empire.

' Theatre TV & Radio Notes '

CBS TV Toast of Town May 17 was devoted to "Josh Logan Story" with scenes from 5 of his hits given...Robert E Sherwood has completed his 2nd of 9 TV dramas for NBC TV. Play is entitled "The Trial of Pontious Pilate" and will be presented in the fall...Gilbert & Sullivan star Martyn Green, currently in Misalliance will be seen as Dr. Watson May 26 on CBS TV Suspense...Leland Hayward will produce the special 2 hour 50th anniversary of Ford Motor Company program June 16 on CBS and NBC TV with all star cast headed by Mary Martin...May 31 edition of NBC TV "Life in NY" will discuss current theatre problems...Vanessa Brown, Seven Year Itch, subbing on CBS Radio for Emily Kimbrough...WOR TV Broadway TV Theatre will go off the air during the summer...WLIB New York aired a salute May 10 to Canada Lee.

' Vaudeville '

Four Aces head new Paramount stage bill, supported by Alan King, Martin Brothers and Jerry Gray and his band.

"Crowning Glory" is Music Hall revue opening May 21 honoring Coronation. Piero Brothers, Pegleg Bates and Cynthia Scott are featured.

' Green Room Department '

PASS THAT CODE...Editorials in 4 NYC dailies urge passage of bills changing NYC Building Code to allow new theatres to be built in apartment houses and/or office buildings. Within the past week a public hearing unanimously approved the 22 bills, and the building committee reported favorably on same. Herald Tribune urges the City Council to now vote on bills without any more delay to open the door to progress on Broadway. The quicker the better, adds World Telegram & Sun. Mirror think it is time to take the shackles off the business like there is no business, while Journal American hopes the City Council stops its backstage meandering and raises the curtain on these measures.

CRITICAL THOUGHTS...The NY commercial theatre seems to be the only one which is trying to get somewhere artistically, comments Chapman, News, who doubts if 1 worthy play equal to Pionio was developed during the year by any college, community or other off Broadway group...Never has the desperation of the summer theatre managers to get stars and plays been so evident, sumises Rice, Post...Summing up the 1952-53 season Sheaffer, Eagle, decides that despite a decent quota of entertaining shows and a few evenings of substantial merit, Broadway theatre continues in a phase of its history lacking in vitality and creative ferment.

THEATRICAL ALL AMERICAN...1952-53 Team picked by McClain, Journal American, includes: Fullback-Shirley Booth, Quarterback-Tom Ewell, Left Halfback-Rosalind Russell, Right Halfback-Victor Moore, Left End-Geraldine Page, Left Tackle-Arthur Kennedy, Left Guard-Menasha Skulnick, Center-Beatrice Lilli, Right Guard-Barry Jones, Right Tackle-Walter Slezak, Right End-Lillie Darvas.

MAIL BOX...Drama critics can be blamed partly for the sad state of theatre to-day, complains a Chicago reader of Editor & Publisher. The public, who buys newspapers and theatre tickets, is entitled to factual coverage of the event so he can make up his own mind. Calloused by years of professional playgoing the critic, writer fears, can well be bored where the average amusement seeker will be highly entertained.

TALENT TIPS...Broadcaster Mary Margaret McBride would be about as deft in her own way in a play as Josephine Hull was in her own way, suggests Morehouse, VT&S...Broadway producers urged to present Vittorio Giannini's operatic version of The Taming of the Shrew by Watt, News...Why shouldn't the Palace offer a bill of European stars, asks Coleman, Mirror.

EMPIRE FINALE...Program at May 24 "Highlights of the Empire" which will benefit ANTA, Actors Fund and Equity Library Theatre includes: Time of the Cuckoo scene with present cast, The Girl I Left Behind me scene with Edna Wallace Hopper, The Importance of Being Earnest with Hurd Hatfield, Oliver Twist with Clarence Derwent and Brandon de Wilde, Mamba's Daughters with Ethel Waters, Life with Father with Howard Lindsay, and The Tempest with Basil Rathbone.

' NYC Theatre News Round Up '

The Bat, James Withers Elliott revival of Mary Roberts Rinehart mystery, postponed re-opening to the fall...The Love of 4 Colonels closed after 141 performances...South Pacific moved to Boston for 5 weeks, then will re-open June 22 at Broadway...Show of Month Club announced closing of its service started in 1948, blaming Shuberts for not granting group tickets to their houses...Clarence Derwent Awards won by Jenny Egan, The Crucible, and David Stewart, Camino Real...Jean Adair died at age 80.

' An English View of A NY Critic '

If Brooks Atkinson, NY Times, is known as one of the 8 "Butchers of Broadway," Cecil Wilson, London Daily Mail, considers him the mildest and most amiable slaughterer he ever met.

English critics heard that theatrical heads may have reeled at the stroke of the American critic's pen, but the quiet, stocky, scholarly looking man of 56 has kept his own head (and hair) through 30 years of criticism. Atkinson informed Wilson that in this period of time he has seen an average of 3 plays a week, and written about 120,000 words a year.

Though British reviewer also has been warned that strong actors blanch and tremble at the mention of Atkinson's name, the man they think of as some sort of a steaming dragon is really the most human being imaginable.

As he noted in his own pieces in the NY Times, the American critic told Wilson that he was very surprised to see so many scrag end shows competing for customers with the prime outs. The reason, he believes, is that theatre going in England is a much more relaxed and less exacting business than it is on Broadway. NY aisle-sitter also noted that intimacy of London playhouses may be one of the reasons for the failure of certain English plays in NY. Plays that have flourished on snug London stages, he explained, tend to wilt in the wide open spaces of the NY stages.

Atkinson looked in vain, Wilson reports, for the great new British dramatist, but admitted to the English critic that the American theatre shares the same deficiency. Though the NY man liked the revivals of Congreve's The Way of the World and T.S. Eliot's Murder in the Cathedral the best of his London playhouse visits, he did concede that no American company could have brought the same style to these classics.

' Pros & Cons by T M K '

Bravery of NY critics will be tested next season. Worse than commenting on friends and relatives, aisle sitters will have to give their honest opinions on a trio of plays presented by theatre press agents. Bill Doll's production of a play based on Sherlock Holmes with Basil Rathbone in the lead will be the first press agent sponsored problem. It is due to open in NY the week of Oct 19. Barry Hyams and George Ross also promise plays for next season. It will be very interesting to see how these publicity men of the theatre, each with long experience, fare when they are in control of the entire production.

Unless some one is withholding vital data not one board member or advisory board member who picked Piconic for the Pulitzer Prize Award for 1952-53 is either theatre trained or a resident of NY.

TV lacks, among many other things, any program aimed at the theatre fan. Stamp collectors, garden growers, pet owners, and what have you, all are deemed strong enough buying groups to have their own programs.

Except for the recent Du Mont TV "Broadway Matinee" program which featured theatre comment and interviews by Ethel Colby, Journal of Commerce critic, there has never been a regular TV program devoted to the theatre. Drama fans may make up all kinds of excuses why they can not get tickets to a Broadway show, but they all buy soap, food, etc. Thus they should be a worthwhile group for sponsors to aim TV shows at. Even without sponsors a theatre news, review and interview regular TV show would make an interesting public service feature of any station's program log.

